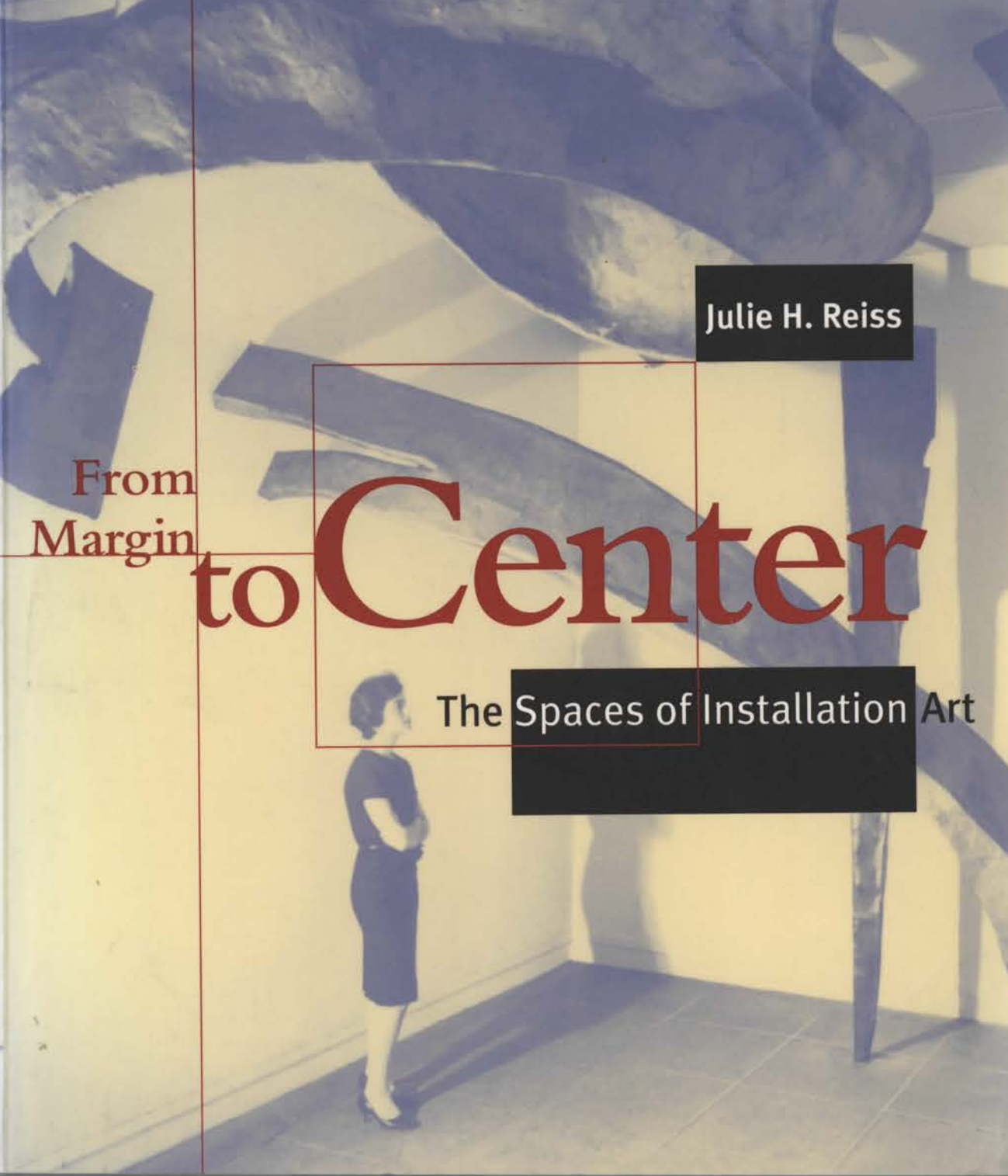




Julie H. Reiss

From
Margin
to Center

The Spaces of Installation Art

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CHAPTER 3

Spaces

the city in the form of painting on the exteriors of buildings. The indoor component consisted of works made by artists directly on the museum's walls. Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, Mel Bochner, and Lawrence Weiner were among the artists who participated. LeWitt executed a wall drawing for the exhibition. He had established a basis for his work in his 1967 statement: "I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as conceptual art. In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work . . . all planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art."²² LeWitt's wall drawings were executed directly on the wall, but they can still be collected. The owner receives a certificate on which is a photo of the work and written instructions. The owner is then authorized to execute the wall drawing.

Like the Whitney's *Anti-Illusion* exhibition, the works in *Using Walls* were not seen by the museum staff until they were in progress or completely installed. The Jewish Museum had a unique position among New York museums, functioning with the freedom and daring of an alternative space, so the entry of ephemeral art into its galleries did not constitute the same kind of conflict between the radical and the establishment as it did at the Museum of Modern Art or even at the Whitney. *Using Walls* was an important early instance of artists creating works directly in a museum situation, and the artists in *Using Walls* were given plenty of leeway in creating their pieces (for example, Lawrence Weiner was allowed to cut away a chunk of wall in one gallery). Nineteen-seventy was also the year of *Information*, the landmark exhibition of Conceptual art at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Kynaston McShine, who had left the Jewish Museum

for MoMA in 1968. This show contained a selection of material produced by artists from all over the world, and much of it pertained to the Vietnam war.

The first exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of what can properly be called Installation art was *Spaces*, held from 30 December 1969 through 1 March 1970. Because this show was specifically dedicated to the exhibition of installations, it warrants close analysis. Conceived and organized by associate curator Jennifer Licht, the exhibition included installations by five individual artists and one group: Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Pula (a group consisting of, at the time, Michael Cain, Patrick Clancy, William Crosby, William Duesing, Paul Fuge, Peter Kindlmann, and David Rumsey), and Franz Erhard Walther. This was the first time that artists were invited by the Museum of Modern Art to create works in situ at the museum rather than creating them in the studio where they could be seen and selected beforehand by a curator. *Spaces* opened six months after the Whitney had shown *Anti-Illusion*, and some of the same artists were included in both exhibitions. The idea for *Spaces* was first presented to the staff in May 1969, and the show was speedily organized. One reason for doing the exhibition was pressure from artists. From Licht's later comments regarding *Spaces*, it becomes clear how, from an institutional point of view, allowing artists to build ephemeral works within the walls of the museum was a concession to political pressure. In Licht's words:

This was a period when many pressure groups, representing various constituencies, were active. (The Art Workers' Coalition, which was a powerful lobby, had . . . already been formed.) Pressure from vocal sources in the art

community was probably a significant factor in enabling me to achieve an exhibition that departed from traditional practices at MOMA and was artist-oriented.²³

As Licht wrote in a memo to Walter Bareiss, then director of operations: "The exhibition will really be a test of the flexibility of our working systems, and will need a strong communal effort from everyone to succeed."²⁴ From the memos that remain, this appears to have been an understatement. The museum staff had to contend with such things as ordering thousands of pairs of paper slippers for visitors to don and shopping bags in which to carry their shoes. (Eventually the museum gave up on both these niceties and visitors were asked to simply remove their shoes and carry them.) Other issues included safety problems, posed by visitors having to navigate darkened rooms, and general maintenance problems.

In the planning stages, the exhibition was called *Environments*. The eventual choice of the title *Spaces* was related to space exploration—1969 was the year that United States astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon. The cover of the *Spaces* catalog shows a dark sky studded with stars and planets.

In *Spaces*, the artists treated a space large enough for the viewer to enter as a single work, rather than as a gallery to be filled with discrete objects. Emphasis was placed on the experience the viewer would have. The works included in *Spaces* were installed directly in the galleries, tailored to the configurations of the spaces they occupied, and were dismantled following the exhibition. The museum was committed to giving free rein to the artists, and regarding restrictions, the catalog acknowledges only one: Robert Morris's piece consisted

of miniature groves of Norway spruce trees planted in diminishing size. In order to maintain a plant-friendly climate, special humidity and temperature conditions had to be maintained. The catalog notes how "originally the air was to be imbued with an additional fillip, negative ions, which induce feelings of euphoria, but this aspect could not be realized."²⁵ If there were other restrictions, always a question with commissioned works, no record of them is available. Licht's letters of invitation to the artists specified only that "the concept is the employment of a cohesive spatial situation in a single work."²⁶ In her letter to Franz Erhard Walther, Licht said: "About 8 artists will be invited to create a work of their choice, each in a room under his control. Is the idea of a work that exists for and uses a specific room or area of interest to you? There will be no stylistic theme or grouping, and the other artists might include, for example, Morris and Flavin with the kind of environmental work they have made for a special room or gallery."²⁷ Thus, site specificity was very important. In fact, it was the defining characteristic of the work Licht envisioned for the show, rather than spectator participation. Interestingly, Walther's piece, *Instruments for Processes*, incorporated the presence of the artist. It was Walther's idea that he and/or his wife be present, and when they were not there, that viewers not be permitted to enter the space (figure 3.6). The press release announced: "Under the supervision of the artist, visitors are invited to participate in the use of his 'instruments for processes.' . . . The artist and his wife will be present at stated hours to assist."²⁸ The installation had canvas covering the floor, with visitors able to put on, climb into, and pick up canvas, felt, and leather objects Walther had made for the space, including climbing into canvas bags that had pockets for five people. During the

3.6

Franz Erhard Walther,
*Instruments for
Processes*, 1969.
Installation view of
the exhibition
Spaces. Museum of
Modern Art, New
York. 30 December
1969 through
1 March 1970.
Photograph © 1999
The Museum of
Modern Art,
New York.



3.7

Franz Erhard
Walther, schedule
for *Instruments for
Processes*, 1969.
From the *Spaces*
exhibition. Museum
of Modern Art, New
York. 30 December
1969 through
1 March 1970.
Photograph © 1999
The Museum of
Modern Art,
New York.

Franz Erhard Walther
will be present
at the times indicated below
to use his pieces with the public

January

S M T W T F S

					1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	

- ☐ 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- ☐ Noon to 2 p.m.
- ☐ 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.
- ☐ 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

hours when the artist was not present, visitors could only look into the room, but not enter or use anything (figure 3.7). Walther had written to Licht before the exhibition opened: "It is necessary to show the use of the objects to the public. That could be done for two hours on each day. . . . During the remaining hours the objects are just exposed along with informations and explanations about the use/employment of things. . . . For certain reasons I want to show and explain the function of the things by myself."²⁹ Even when Walther was present, one could not just walk in: in order to avoid having the space become too crowded, the artist invited people in at his discretion. In this piece, participation was only under the explicit direction and supervision of the artist, who controlled the action.

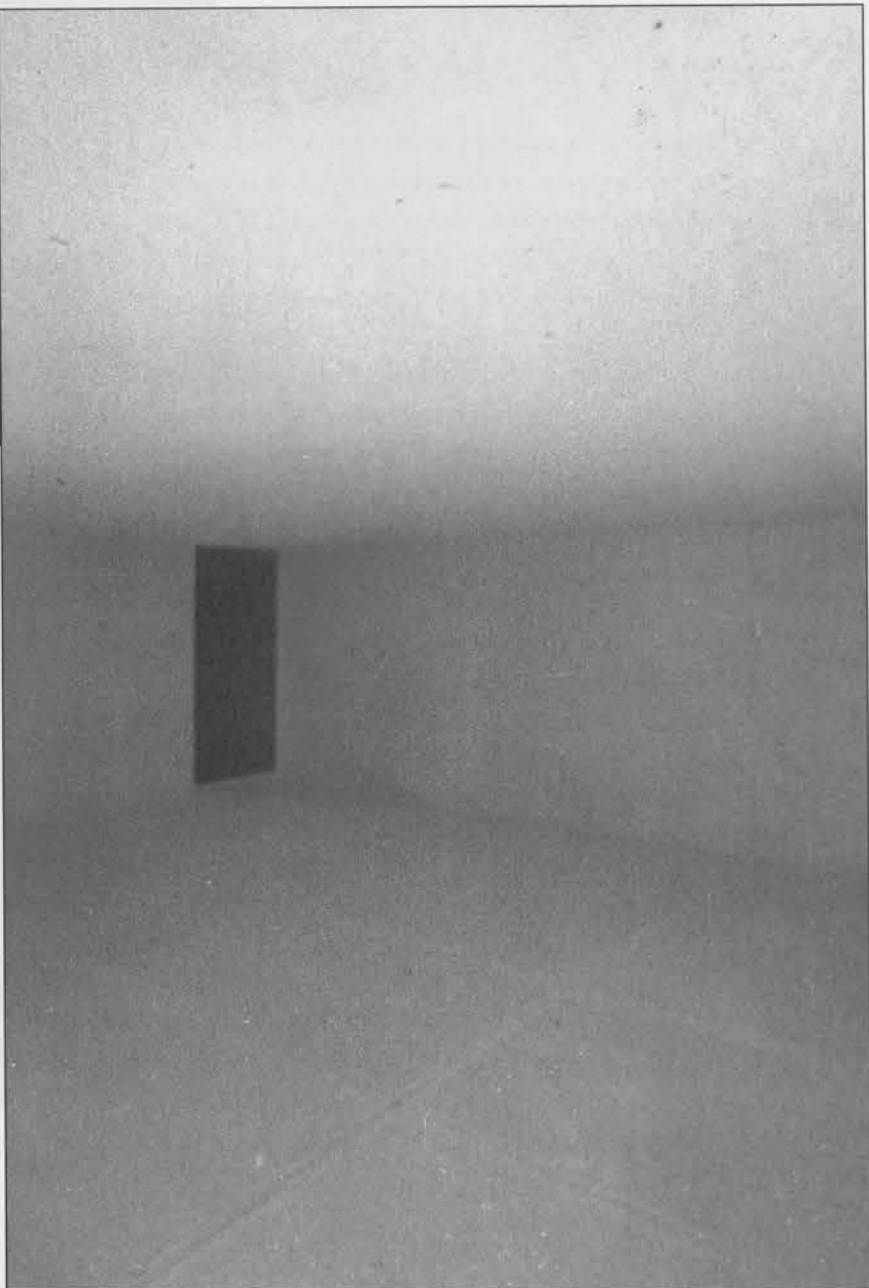
Although the other five works did not rely on the presence of the artist or specific activities for the spectator/participant, the presence of the viewer and an interaction between the viewer and the piece was certainly intended to be a factor. Michael Asher used his space to create a room lined on the ceiling, walls, and floor with acoustic paneling (figure 3.8). The environment absorbed ambient sounds, in some areas more than others. In the corners of the room, sound was almost totally absorbed, creating near total silence. Asher even placed the constructed wall sections on rubber pads to eliminate vibrations. To protect the fiberglass floor, visitors were not permitted to wear shoes in the space, but once inside, they were permitted to relax on the floor, and to stay as long as they liked. In addition to the practical necessity of protecting the floor, removing shoes before entering the work also literally meant leaving the grit of the street behind. Asher's piece was not intended to merge with or seem continuous with the outside environment. Its floor-to-ceiling walls

3.8

Michael Asher,
Untitled, 1969.

Installation view of
the exhibition
Spaces. Museum of
Modern Art, New
York. 30 December
1969 through 1
March 1970.

Photograph © 1999
The Museum of
Modern Art, New
York.



isolated it not only from the street outside, but from the rest of the museum as well.³⁰

Larry Bell's room was completely darkened, with black walls and floor, and divided by a partition. Coated sheets of glass reflected streaks of light, which came from an exterior source reflected from a white wall outside the room. Viewers had to navigate their way through the darkened space. In Dan Flavin's *Untitled (For Sonja)*, two opposing wall-length rows of fluorescent lights were presented, one low, one high, one green, one yellow, creating a light-filled environment (figure 3.9). Robert Morris created a room in which the viewer had to stand constricted in a narrow, shoulder-high, cruciform trench. Looking up, one could see four groves of live spruce trees, planted in descending size. The trees sloped upward toward the corners of the room, and provided a false sense of spatial recession. A fine mist filled the room (figure 3.10). Pula used the sculpture garden to set up an elaborate system of lights and sounds that responded to ambient stimuli, although not with the one-to-one directness of Rauschenberg's *Soundings*.

Licht, a young associate curator from England, presented her idea for the exhibition to the other members of the Museum of Modern Art staff using the following arguments:

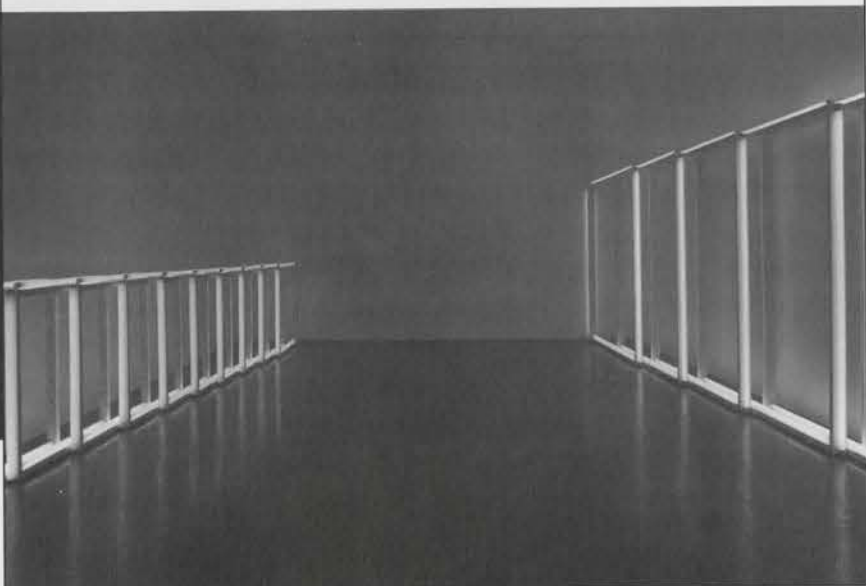
Recent manifestations of art move away from the creation of an enduring object which maintains its own presence spatially and physically. The artists concerned are altering or discarding the traditional dichotomy of viewer and static object for an environmental situation, which envelops and enmeshes the viewer in a fuller involvement with actual space and a more mandatory interaction with the art. . . .

Certainly a conscious issue of the current preoccupation with enormous physiographical artworks is the unfeasibility of subjecting this art to the usual processes through which the traditional art object—controllable, containable, portable, preservable and hence marketable—is passed.³¹

She urged the museum to be responsive to the nontraditional aspects of the newest art and to accept the challenge that such work presented. In her final statement, she called on the museum's to be an institution at the service of the public, stressing that whereas a commercial gallery whose existence depends on works that are marketable could not show ephemeral work, the museum could: "Some of the aims of the recent artists' protests have been directed toward disassociating art

3.9

Dan Flavin, *Untitled (For Sonja)*, 1969. Installation view of the exhibition *Spaces*. Museum of Modern Art, New York. 30 December 1969 through 1 March 1970. Photograph © 1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



from the marketing system, and demands were made of museums to accept some direct responsibility. The works for this exhibition will be created especially, and dismantled afterwards. Here we can assume a role that belongs uniquely to the public institution and lies outside the domain of the art dealer.”³² Licht appears to have been striving to find a role for the museum that was outside the market system.

Although Licht’s internal memo acknowledged that the kind of work in *Spaces* questioned the structure of the art world’s marketing system, none of the materials generated by the museum for public consumption mentioned those issues. Instead, it was the notion of the spectator as participant that the museum played up in presenting the show to the public. The press release stated: “Actual space is now



3-10
Robert Morris,
Untitled. Installation
view of the exhibition
Spaces. Museum of
Modern Art, New
York. 30 December
1969 through
1 March 1970.
Photograph © 1999
The Museum of
Modern Art, New
York.

being employed as an active ingredient, and the scope of the work of art has expanded to include the viewer.” It was a novelty to be able to enter a work of art: “In this exhibition you don’t observe what the artist has done, you experience it. You actually go into the work of art.”³³ This idea was also emphasized in Licht’s catalog essay:

[Space] is now being considered as an active ingredient, not simply to be represented but to be shaped and characterized by the artist, and capable of involving and merging the viewer and art in a situation of greater scope and scale. In effect, one now enters the interior space of the work of art . . . and is presented with a set of conditions rather than a finite object. Working within the almost unlimited potential of these enlarged, more spatially complex circumstances, the artist is now free to influence and determine, even govern, the sensations of the viewer. The human presence and perception of the spatial context have become materials of art.³⁴

Licht’s remarks have an interesting relationship with the discussions of phenomenology that were beginning to gain currency. She expressed the idea of the work of art as a set of conditions established by the artist to be experienced by the viewer.

It is interesting to see the effect on Installation art of larger spaces, more money, and more elaborate materials—and particularly of sophisticated technology. These were all available, in nearly unprecedented amounts, to the artists participating in *Spaces* as a result of substantial corporate support for the exhibition; and some of the installations were technically elaborate and quite expensive. This magnitude drew attention to the patronage factor, reflecting a spirit of acquiescence rather than rebellion. Dan Flavin, who received dona-

tions of materials for his piece from General Electric, was criticized by the Art Workers' Coalition for this concession, and urged to drop out of the exhibition.³⁵ Collaboration with the museum was clearly not automatic or necessarily enviable at this time. Gregory Battcock, writing about the exhibition for *Arts* magazine, picked up on this issue, but he exonerated the artists and blamed the museum. His article, entitled "The Politics of Space," focused on the morally questionable coupling of corporate funds and the Museum of Modern Art:

It's too bad that nobody noticed that many of the contributors to the show (or their parent companies) engage in research and production activities that, either directly or indirectly, have benefited the Department of Defense and American genocide in Vietnam. . . .

The artists get their materials where they can. Why not? There is no connection that can be philosophically demonstrated between the art works themselves and the war. However there is just one connection. . . . The Museum sets itself up as a guardian and contributor to the culture. . . . And what is the museum doing about its involvement with art? It didn't even bother to check up on the firms they solicited equipment from. They have helped the corporate mentalities to ease their burden of guilt and, having said their five Hail Marys, their conscience.³⁶

Despite the unconventional nature of the *Spaces* exhibition, and the Museum of Modern Art's attempts to accommodate artists' demands, James Turrell declined the invitation to participate in the exhibition on principle, because of what museums represented.³⁷

The critical response to *Spaces* was mixed. Predictably, it was not taken entirely seriously by some reporters, who described it as if it

were a funhouse. As foreshadowed in the criticism of the Environments a decade earlier, the physical experience was singled out: "Before anyone can enter the exhibition, to protect the works he must remove his shoes, don a pair of clumsy paper slippers and then slide along the floors of the show."³⁸ Nonetheless, the issue of spectator participation was still shown to be of importance, perhaps because it was in these terms that the exhibition was presented. Carter Ratcliff judged the works in *Spaces* on the basis of their success in this regard:

Now—these works in the *Spaces* show are very different. The viewer must enter into them physically. Participation is automatic, denied to no one. The artist can count on a response. His art is in designing an environment where this is the case. His design must be left incomplete. It must, in fact, be a near void or chaos, differentiated or given form only insofar as that form is open—*automatically*—to anyone who enters. Further, this random entering must—*automatically*—result as less formlessness. The participant must feel that his entrance means something, has an effect.³⁹

Ratcliff concludes: "Of these four exhibits, Pula's is the least successful as an environment. Literally speaking, it is an environment, the most extensive and the most attractive. But the viewer doesn't become a participant."⁴⁰ Although viewer participation was the criterion for judging the success of an environment, Ratcliff was not searching for specific activities. An effective environment required something far less tangible: the sense that the viewer was needed to complete the work. Judging from Ratcliff's reaction, it would appear that Pula's piece failed as theater, and (in a reverse of Fried's position) this was seen by Ratcliff as problematic.

For the museum, viewer participation had a slightly different resonance. Robert Storr, who became curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1990, had this to say about the *Spaces* exhibition and the emphasis that was placed on viewer participation:

So little attention is paid to how visitors experience art in museums that the few occasions where you have something that is "interactive," you make the most of it. [*Spaces*] was done in and around the time of relevance and outreach, and basically was the last, that is prior to recently, the last episode of trying to make modern art a populist phenomenon. So I think the ideological context of that is this other factor, and how directly [Licht] or [the museum] thought about the connection, I nonetheless think that it exists in that framework.⁴¹

In *Spaces* there was an attempt to make the museum experience a more relaxed one. The guards were given special instructions to allow people to sit or lie on the floor and to stay in any of the rooms as long as they wished.⁴² For many visitors, the experience of lying barefoot on the floor of the Museum of Modern Art probably did go a long way toward making the place seem more accessible. There was a particular status to the art museum in the United States at the end of the 1960s, and it explains some of the activities at the Museum of Modern Art. Art was to be for everyone, and the museum, as a public institution, would make that possible. During the 1960s, many new museums opened throughout the United States, making art even more accessible, while providing a new source of civic pride. There was a desire to make culture more democratic. It appeared as though not even the Museum of Modern Art—long regarded as a bastion of

elitism—was immune to the times, and the *Spaces* exhibition must be seen in this context. It was this populist aspect of the museum that Licht drew on when she pitched her show to the museum staff on the basis of what the museum could do as a public institution.

The Museum of Modern Art found itself in a new role in another sense: Grace Glueck, reviewing *Spaces* for the *New York Times*, acknowledged the new role that the museum was playing:

In effect, the show, whose installations are temporary, adds to the museum's traditional pursuits of collecting, curating and exhibiting, the somewhat radical function as [sic] aesthetic laboratory. And Mrs. Licht, aware that museums and their interest in the "dead" past are increasingly called into question by younger artists, affirms that one of the show's primary purposes is to find out if a museum can be used as a situation for "live" experiments. . . . "I decided to ask for proposals that would make unaccustomed demands on our staff and resources. So, in effect, we became responsible not only for exhibiting the artists' works, but for executing them."⁴³

This last quote from Licht about the demanding role of the curator when organizing an exhibition of Installation art indicates the new role of the museum.

Despite the lukewarm critical responses, the *Spaces* exhibition was important for the museum. As Licht stated in retrospect: "*Spaces* . . . received a good deal of corporate financial support, it attracted a lot of press attention, it had a decent audience, and it reduced some of the pressure from the artistic community. By those standards it would be counted a success."⁴⁴

Licht later described the fundamental leap of faith that an exhibition of Installation art entailed. Her remarks, which partially echo those made by James Monte regarding *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, summarize the ways in which Installation art first challenged and then altered, at least temporarily, museum practice:

The Museum was a bureaucracy: scores of people were drawn into the process of planning a major exhibition, and many of them knew little about contemporary art. Part of the curatorial *devoir* is to persuade any number of departments or committees that an idea has validity. Usually this persuasion is based primarily on the presentation of visual material, i.e. photographs of works that will comprise the exhibition. In this case, of course, I did not necessarily know long beforehand exactly what each participant intended to do: indeed, nor did the participant himself always know! At many stages of the planning process, therefore, I was asking people to suspend familiar means of judgement. This naturally provoked philosophical difficulties because the balance of power was changed: authority was rescinded from the institution and devolved instead on the artist.⁴⁵

Although the changes Licht described were true for *Spaces*, they did not represent a permanent change in the way the institution operated. For many years, *Spaces* remained something of an isolated occurrence, despite its success from the museum's point of view. Its most concrete legacy was the Projects series, established in 1971. Proposed by Licht, the Projects series was a direct outgrowth of *Spaces*—continuing the notion of the museum as aesthetic laboratory. With the inauguration of this series, there would always be a space dedicated to new, experimental work in the museum. As Licht later said:

"Certainly *Spaces* helped open the Museum doors for new forms of art, and it furthered freedom of access to artists. Programmes such as Projects, where small galleries were given over to site-specific work . . . followed."⁴⁶ The first Projects series ran from 1971 until 1982. Proportionally, the vast majority of exhibitions of contemporary art held at the museum during these years were Projects exhibitions. These shows were not all installations, but some were, and Projects was, for a long time, the main forum within the museum in which anything installation-like was presented. The Projects series guaranteed that the museum would always have something contemporary on view, regardless of its other exhibitions. In the 1970s there were often two or more projects on view simultaneously, in different parts of the museum.

The Projects series was inaugurated with a work by Keith Sonnier, significantly an installation that contained a strong element of spectator participation. Sonnier's installation consisted of a sound and light environment where images of the viewers were projected from one room to another. Video as an art medium was exploited by a number of artists in the 1970s for its potential for involving the spectator.⁴⁷ The press release presented the exhibition in what was already becoming familiar language: "In involving the spectator as performer, the changing situation becomes completely different than that of the usual activity in a museum of just looking at objects. . . . The piece is activated through the participation of the visiting public and tries to engage the spectator on a more basic level than just visual perception."⁴⁸ The language used here is very similar to that in the press release for Rauschenberg's *Soundings* and also for *Spaces*.

Although only sporadically on view, participatory exhibitions had become established at the museum.

Direct viewer participation in terms of activities appeared again in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art with a 1976 Projects show by William T. Wiley. The project, which ran from April 9 through May 16, was designed to encourage activity by the viewer, according to the press release: "While appreciating the need for restrictions, Wiley says he has always understood the urge to touch in museums, and his current installation encourages viewer participation. . . . Museum visitors are invited to play a guitar, throw the *I-Ching*, and look through the notebook Wiley kept while creating the piece."⁴⁹ Viewers were also invited to draw with pens on a large plywood heart on the wall, and pastels were reportedly made available for visitors to draw directly on the wall (figure 3.11). The artist was not present.



3.11
Installation view of
the exhibition,
*Projects: William T.
Wiley*, Museum of
Modern Art, New
York, 2 April through
16 May 1976.
Photograph © 1999
The Museum of
Modern Art, New
York.